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THE KENTUCKY PRESBYTERIANS IN 1849: SLAVERY AND THE KENTUCKY CONSTITUTION

by VICTOR B. HOWARD*

Slavery was an old question in Kentucky in 1849. The principle issue which agitated the Constitutional Convention of 1792 in Kentucky was the status that slavery should occupy in the state.¹ When the Convention convened in Danville, the Presbyterian minister, David Rice, "pleaded that the convention 'resolve unconditionally to put an end to slavery in Kentucky.'"² Despite the sincere effort of a small minority of clergymen and benevolent laymen the convention adopted article nine of the constitution which denied the legislature the "power to pass laws for the emancipation of slaves without the consent of their owners."³ The Second Constitutional Convention convened in Frankfort in 1799. Before the convention met, advocates of gradual emancipation formed a party to secure their objective. The Presbyterian, John Breckinridge, in an emancipationist meeting at Bryan's Station, opposed and defeated the more radical emancipationists who wanted to free the slaves then living in Kentucky and colonize them without paying the owners. When the Constitutional Convention met, the proslavery forces again were too strong and John Breckinridge joined with George Nicholas in securing the addition of a moderating provision to the slavery article of the constitution of

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¹ Bennett H. Young, *History and Texts of the Three Constitutions of Kentucky* (Louisville, Kentucky: Courier-Journal Job Printing Company, 1890), 32.

² J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 1940), 290. For a detailed account of David Rice's activities and position in the convention see: Joan W. Coward, "The Kentucky Constitutions of 1792, and 1799: The Formation of A Political Tradition," Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1971, pp. 113-115.

³ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 291. Lewis and Richard Collins, *History of Kentucky* (Louisville: John P. Morton and Company, 1924 reprint), I, 25.

1792,⁴ which guaranteed to slaves "the privilege of an impartial trial by a petit jury."⁵

In 1832 an effort to promote the gradual emancipation of slaves within the religious community was undertaken by Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, son of John, in the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky. Breckinridge's resolutions, which were tabled, called for support of the American Colonization Society. The resolutions recommended that ministers endeavor to instruct slaves in the gospel, and that they favor all proper measures to secure gradual emancipation of slaves.⁶ The Breckinridge resolutions were indefinitely postponed in 1833, but in 1834 a new committee under the chairmanship of Dr. John Clarke Young, president of Centre College and an Old School Presbyterian, was appointed to study the problem of slavery; it drew up a plan to deal with the problem. At the meeting of the Synod of Kentucky in 1835, the select committee recommended a system of gradual emancipation.⁷

In 1837, the Kentucky General Assembly submitted the question of constitution revision to a referendum but the electorate rejected the proposition partially because of the activities of northern abolitionists in the canvass. The efforts of the Kentucky Presbyterians to deal with the problem of slavery as a sectarian, or moral, question was also nullified by the fear of immediate abolition.⁸ The Synod of Kentucky, however, was

⁴ Coward, "The Kentucky Constitutions . . .," 302-304. W. L. Breckinridge to Robert J. Breckinridge, February 6, 1849, Breckinridge Papers, Library of Congress. James P. Gregory, "The Question of Slavery in the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, XXIII, No. 2 (April, 1949), 90.

⁵ *Constitution of Kentucky* (1799), Article VII.

⁶ *Reply of Robert Wickliffe to Robert J. Breckinridge* (Lexington: Observer and Reporter Press, 1841), 60. For Robert Breckinridge's early emancipation activities see: Hambleton Tapp, "The Slavery Controversy Between Robert Wickliffe and Robert J. Breckinridge Prior to the Civil War," *The Filson Club Quarterly*, XIX, No. 3 (July, 1949).

⁷ *Address of the Synod of Kentucky on Slavery in 1835* (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1862), 19-20. *The Louisville Examiner*, January 29, 1848.

⁸ *Commonwealth* (Frankfort), April 18, 1838. Asa Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850* (Louisville: Standard Printing Company, 1918), 107.

persistent and in 1844 another select committee drew up an address to Presbyterians in Kentucky urging the instruction and emancipation of their slaves.⁹

Because of the pressing demand for constitutional reforms, a bill to call a constitutional convention passed the legislature and was sustained by a majority of the voters in 1847. It was approved by a second referendum in 1848. The emancipationists of Kentucky were to have another opportunity to abolish slavery in Kentucky. It came at a time when Kentucky was undergoing a religious revival in which the evils of the institution of slavery were exposed to renewed examination. The Reverend John G. Fee, a New School Presbyterian, who visited a considerable part of Kentucky as a missionary, reported that the people were beginning to feel the evils of slavery. The revival turned the attention of the church to the responsibility of instructing the slaves in the gospel. Dr. Young preached a sermon in the Danville Presbyterian Church on the religious duties of masters to slaves, and the Presbytery of Muhlenburg reported that there was considerable interest within its bounds concerning this work. The Synod of Kentucky called on all the churches within the state to do their duty with reference to the religious instruction of the slaves.¹⁰

In 1837 the Presbyterian Church separated into two independent branches, the Old School and the New School. The crucial issue in the separation was the nature of unregenerated man. The Old School adhered more closely to the traditional concept of predestination while the New School was inclined

⁹ *Louisville Examiner*, December 2, 1844.

¹⁰ W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, January 21, February 16, 1848, Breckinridge Family Papers. C. Pirtle to Joseph Holt, February 21, 1848, Joseph Holt Papers, Library of Congress. *The Examiner*, October 2, 1847. *Watchman of the Prairie* (Chicago), September 7, 1847. *Louisville Morning Courier*, January 17, 1848. *Christian Watchman* (Boston), February 4, 18, 1848, cited by *The Examiner*, July 24, 1847. *Presbyterian Herald* (Louisville), February 15, 1849. *Danville Tribune*, February 9, 1849, cited by *Covington Journal*, February 16, 1849. Records of Muhlenburg Presbytery, 1847-1853 (Manuscript Record, Historical Foundation, Presbyterian Church, Montreat, North Carolina), (April 7, 1848), III. Records of the Synod of Kentucky, 1843-1850 (Old School) (Manuscript Record, Historical Foundation, Presbyterian Church), (October, 1848), VI, 200, 225. *The Examiner*, November 18, 1848.

to believe that the impenitent sinner was in full possession of all the ability necessary to a full compliance with all the commands of God and was justly held accountable for his sins. Both branches of the Church agreed that the decisive issues between them were in the realms of theology and polity. In its conservatism the Old School rejected the Plan of Union of 1801 by which the Presbyterian Church worked in harmony with other Calvinistic churches through benevolent agencies, including the American Home Missionary Society. By breaking the ties with institutions which were predominately liberal and northern, the Old School Presbyterian Church freed itself of the agitation of the slavery question in the General Assembly. It was the agitation of the slavery question in the Church which made it possible for the Old School to secure a necessary majority by the support of the South to expel the liberal synods of the North. Although the New School Presbyterian Church was the antislavery branch of the denomination, in Kentucky this distinction did not prevail.¹¹

In June, 1847, Dr. Robert J. Breckinridge resigned the Presidency of Jefferson College, Pennsylvania, to accept the pastoral charge of the First Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky. His brother William Lewis, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Louisville [for twenty-three years], considered the course of events which brought Robert back to Kentucky at a time when the destiny of slavery was being considered in the Bluegrass state, as nothing short of providential.¹²

Breckinridge lost little time after returning to Kentucky before he threw himself, with accustomed vigor, into the conflict over slavery. He wrote an article in the *African Repository* in which he condemned slavery as a system of "clear robbery"

¹¹ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), I, 395-398. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 84-85. Victor B. Howard, "The Anti-Slavery Movement in the Presbyterian Church, 1835-1861," Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1961, pp. 48-52.

¹² John C. Darby to Robert J. Breckinridge, February 10, 1847; W. L. Breckinridge to Robert J. Breckinridge, February 16, 1847, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Frankfort Commonwealth*, June 22, 1847.

and encouragement to "universal prostitution." He realized that there were hopes of success, as well as risks; things might be set back a hundred years. He speculated on the wisdom of compromising, and under the influence of these random thoughts, in December, 1848, he, writing under the pen-name "Fayette," suggested a system of gradual emancipation and colonization for slaves born after the system was inaugurated.¹³

Breckinridge's plan harmonized with the program of the American Colonization Society in Kentucky, which was dominated by Presbyterians. The Kentucky Society held its annual meeting in the Presbyterian Church in Frankfort on January 21, 1849. A. M. Cowan, a Presbyterian clergyman, was the Society agent for Kentucky. Dr. Breckinridge was in attendance, too. The meeting was addressed by the Honorable Joseph R. Underwood, (Bowling Green), a leading Presbyterian layman and United States Senator from Kentucky, who had recently introduced a bill in the United States Senate for federal subsidy for colonization. Stuart Robinson, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Frankfort, delivered the annual address. Dr. Robinson saw Kentucky as rapidly preparing to take her place as a free state. The American Colonization Society quietly assisted the emancipationists in Kentucky in their efforts to secure gradual emancipation and colonization.¹⁴

The first step in the organization of an emancipation party took place in Louisville, February 1, 1849. Addresses were made by Dr. William Lewis Breckinridge and the Reverend Edward P. Humphrey, pastor of the Second Presbyterian church in Louisville. When the resolution committee reported the resolutions, W. L. Breckinridge opposed them because they did not specifically call for colonization, and because other measures, including judiciary reforms, were introduced. Breckin-

¹³ *African Repository* cited by *The Examiner*, November 6, 1847. R. J. Breckinridge to S. R. Williams, November 17, 1848. "Fayette" to Editor, *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, December 16, 1848. W. L. Breckinridge to Robert J. Breckinridge, February 6, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

¹⁴ *The Daily Commonwealth* (Frankfort), January 18, 20, 30, 1849. *Presbyterian Herald*, February 1, 1849. *African Repository*, XXV, No. 5 (May, 1849), 146. Alexander M. Cowan to William McLain, February 17, 1849, American Colonization Papers, Library of Congress.

ridge proposed a substitute for the resolutions. The resolutions, together with the proposed substitutes, were sent back to the committee and W. L. Breckinridge was added to the committee, which accepted his substitute measures but insisted on adding the judicial reform measure to it. At an adjourned meeting Breckinridge made an eloquent speech in defense of his position, and the convention adopted his measures and dropped the judiciary reform proposals. These included a proposal for a state convention and an address to the emancipationists of Kentucky. The address was written by Breckinridge at the request of the convention. It informed the friends of emancipation that the true glory and highest prosperity of the state depended upon the ultimate extinction of slavery and the substantial removal of the Negroes. After the resolutions were adopted, W. L. Breckinridge spoke for an hour in advocacy of the emancipation cause. The editor of the *Examiner* thanked him for the true and graphic portrayal of an institution which makes chattel of a man created in the image of God and robs the Negro of manhood and the sacred family rights.¹⁵

W. L. Breckinridge secured a promise from *The Louisville Democrat* to open its pages, hitherto closed, to the emancipationist position. He proposed to present Robert J. Breckinridge's plan for emancipation to that journal's Democratic readers. His first two articles of February 14 and 16 to the *Louisville Democrat* revealed Robert Breckinridge's plan for emancipation, identifying him only as a correspondent to the *Lexington Observer and Reporter*. The Louisville clergyman called for a free and open discussion in the *Democrat*, even though the editor was opposed to the plan.¹⁶

Breckinridge argued that some plan for abolishing slavery and the removal of the Negroes was among the first necessities

¹⁵ *The Examiner* (Louisville), February 3, 17, 1849. *Louisville Daily Journal*, February 5, 1849. *Presbyterian Herald*, February 15, 1849. *New York Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1849. W. L. Breckinridge to Robert J. Breckinridge, February 6, 14, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 15, 1849. *The Presbyterian Herald*, March 1, 1849.

¹⁶ *Louisville Democrat*, February 14, 16, 1849, cited by *The Examiner*, March 3, 1849.

of the Commonwealth. Without it, prosperity would be retarded. He compared the wealth and prosperity of Kentucky with that of the free states, which showed that Kentucky was at a disadvantage. Turning to the moral and intellectual influences of slavery, Breckinridge pointed out that the slave was reduced to the status of chattel so that his soul itself was "well-nigh at the mercy of his master." But the evil effects of the institution were not limited to the slaves. It exerted "many evil influences upon the temper, the feelings, and the character of the master."¹⁷

William Breckinridge did not limit his support of the emancipation party to the use of his pen. As the canvass got under way he scheduled several speaking engagements. Early in April he spoke in Shelbyville before journeying on to Lexington. On June 2, he addressed meetings at Brunerstown and Jeffersontown in Jefferson County. Two weeks later he debated the emancipation question with a prominent Louisville lawyer, William Christian Bullitt, in the Reformed Church outside Louisville. On a previous occasion Bullitt had charged ministers with the violation of the duties of their office by advocating the emancipation cause. Breckinridge declared that he had spoken only in compliance to requests from citizens. He insisted that the clergy had a right and duty to advance the cause of emancipation in every honorable way.¹⁸

The friends of emancipation throughout the state were stirred to action by Breckinridge's address and the call for a state emancipationist convention in Frankfort on April 25, 1849. "The field is wide open. Slavery and the Convention is the theme," wrote John G. Fee. A meeting was held in Lewis County, and he was selected as a delegate to the state convention. Fee had John Wesley's sermon on slavery reprinted for circulation and planned to reprint David Rice's address on

¹⁷ *Louisville Democrat*, cited by *The Examiner*, March 17, 1849; April 7, 1849. May 19, 1849. W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, March 17, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

¹⁸ W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, March 17, 1849. *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, June 6, 1849.

slavery before the Kentucky convention of 1792.¹⁹ A week later the emancipationists of Mason County met in Maysville and selected delegates to the state convention. Four of the delegates were clergymen, among whom was R. C. Grundy, an Old School Presbyterian.²⁰ The convention, which met in Shelby County, was dominated by clergymen. After adopting resolutions, delegates were selected for the state convention. Nine of the delegates were clergymen, three of whom were Old School Presbyterians.²¹ When the convention met in Mercer County, an Old School Presbyterian minister and a New School clergymen were selected to attend the state convention.²² The convention which met in Frankfort to elect delegates to the state convention selected three churchmen, one an Old School Presbyterian and one a New School Presbyterian. The emancipation party of Lexington met in convention on April 14. Henry Clay and Robert J. Breckinridge spoke eloquently in support of emancipation. Breckinridge introduced a set of resolutions which condemned slavery as an institution and proposed a state convention to adopt a common platform for the party. The convention selected Robert J. Breckinridge and John H. Brown (Richmond), Old School Presbyterian clergymen, as delegates.²³ Presbyterian clergymen were selected as delegates by several other local conventions.²⁴

When the Frankfort emancipation convention of April 25 convened, twenty-one of the 150 delegates were clergymen, nearly one-seventh. Even though the Presbyterians were the least numerous of the major denominations in Kentucky, of the twenty-one clergymen attending the convention, thirteen were Presbyterians. There were many prominent laymen from all

¹⁹ For a study of Robert J. Breckinridge's emancipationist activities in the year of 1849 see: Hambleton Tapp, "Robert J. Breckinridge and the Year 1849," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, XII, No. 3 (July 1938). John G. Fee to John E. Benton, April 5, 1849, American Missionary Association Correspondence, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University. *The Maysville Eagle*, April 21, 1849.

²⁰ *The Maysville Eagle*, April 10, 1849.

²¹ *Louisville Morning Courier*, April 13, 1849. *The Examiner*, April 14, 1849.

²² *Louisville Morning Courier*, April 19, 1849. *The Examiner*, April 21, 1849.

²³ *Louisville Morning Courier*, April 23, 1849.

²⁴ For conventions at Covington, Lancaster, Tomkinsville and others see: *The Examiner*, April 28, 1849 and other issues.

denominations. The Presbyterian laymen and clergy were among the most influential members of the convention.²⁵

The convention was divided into two classes. One faction wanted to engraft in the new constitution some scheme of gradual prospective emancipation. Another, more numerous group wanted to insert in the new constitution the Law of 1833, barring the importation of slaves into the state. This faction also wanted to insert an "open clause," in the constitution which would permit the legislature to call a convention at any time in the future to deal with the question of emancipation as a separate measure. Most of the Presbyterian clergymen were in favor of engrafting the open clause in the new Constitution. The resolutions committee, which was composed of twenty-four members, included six clergymen — five Presbyterians and a Baptist. The committee reported resolutions, drawn up by Robert Breckinridge, which set forth the idea of incorporating the Law of 1833 and the open clause in the constitution. William Breckinridge offered a substitute from the floor which would have engrafted a gradual emancipation and colonization scheme in the constitution. Robert Breckinridge, John C. Young and Stuart Robinson — all Old School Presbyterians spoke in favor of the open clause. Robert Breckinridge argued that it was indispensable and the very foundation of the matter that some plan be inserted in the new constitution so that the people should have a right to consider how they wanted the matter settled at the polls.²⁶

Breckinridge believed it was a hopeless task to strive to get a specific plan engrafted in the new constitution. He looked

²⁵ *The Examiner*, May 5, 1849. *The Presbyterian Herald*, May 3, 1849. The statistics for the various denominations in Kentucky in 1849-1850 were as follows: Methodist Episcopal Church, South — 598 traveling and Local ministers. Baptist Church, South — 481 ordained and licensed ministers. Presbyterian Ministers, Old School — 70. Presbyterian Ministers, New School — approximately 30. See: *Methodist Almanac*, (1849), 19. *Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* (1850), 372. *Minutes of the General Assembly* (New School), (1850), 423. *Minutes of the General Assembly* (Old School), (1849).

²⁶ The Law of 1833 was repealed by the Kentucky legislature in February, 1849, thus opening the state to the importation of slaves for the first time since 1833. The emancipationists felt that this repeal was a pro-slavery position which would retard emancipation in Kentucky.

to a plan that might be adopted by the legislature. Breckinridge's position in the convention was taken pragmatically. He had informed a friend before the convention that he wanted the question settled at once instead of fifty years later as he would not be around to discharge his conscience. Breckinridge's speech was the high point of the convention. The most elegant words spoken in the convention came as a result of a question put to Robert Breckinridge. A colleague asked him if he was willing to sacrifice his political principles to carry out emancipation. "I can, and I will" was the instant and unhesitating reply. "What am I expected," said Breckinridge, "to sacrifice to my political feelings and party? The personal freedom of two hundred thousand of my fellow-beings . . .; their rights to the free use of their own bodies and their own souls; their right to use the proceeds of their labor and the sweat of their brows; and the right of teaching and being taught God's holy word. What kind of a state of society would that be . . . in which the marriage relation was abolished by law, in which no man had any wife in particular, and no woman any husband in particular, where universal concubinage prevailed, and no child knew his own father, and no father knew his own child. It would be all hell upon earth. That, Sir, is negro Slavery." The reporter called attention to the expanded form, the flashing eyes, the indignant look, the rapid interchange over the countenance, of pathos, of benevolent expression, and of shame and indignation which gave effect to the speech.

The *Louisville Courier* which was edited by Walter N. Haldeman, a prominent Presbyterian layman, spoke of that speech as "the most eloquent, impressive and forcible address ever heard" by those present at the convention. A correspondent to the *New York Observer* wrote that human eloquence had "never reached a higher flight, never produced a deeper effect."²⁷

²⁷ *The Central Watchman*, (Cincinnati), May 4, 1849. *The Christian Observer*, (Philadelphia), May 12, 1849. Correspondent to Editor, April 26, 1849, Frankfort, *New York Observer*, May 19, 1849. *The Liberator*, (Boston), May 25, 1849. *The Frankfort Commonwealth*, May 1, 1849 — Robert Breckinridge to Samuel Steel, April 17, 1849. *The Presbyterian Banner*, May 9, 1849, citing *Louisville Morning Courier*. Sister Agnes Geraldine McGann, *Nativism in Kentucky to 1860*, (Washington: Catholic University, 1944), 19. *The Examiner* cited by *Western Christian Journal* (Cincinnati), June 29, 1849.

The advocates of the open clause carried the convention with them and in a spirit of harmony the minority accepted the majority position. During the convention some of the clergymen and laymen who favored making the constitutional canvass a moral movement suggested the propriety of calling a convention of the ministers of Kentucky to express their collective views of the question before the people of the state. Robert Breckinridge and the Presbyterians did not support this proposal and several Democratic newspapers spoke out against "a party led by preachers." The proposal was eventually dropped.²⁸

Although Robert J. Breckinridge occupied the most prominent position in the Frankfort Convention, he had not taken the position of leadership in the movement. William Breckinridge had been more energetic in the work and as early as March 17 he had urged his brother Robert "to come out more fully" than he had in the cause.²⁹ Even before the Frankfort Emancipation Convention was held in April, Robert Breckinridge received requests to speak in defense of the emancipation position. After the convention adjourned, requests came pouring in from all over the state and especially from central Kentucky.³⁰ The emancipationists were particularly urgent in their call for Breckinridge to meet the renowned lawyer, Benjamin (Ben) Hardin, a Whig, who had declared from a platform in Bardstown that he would like to meet "that great Presbyterian

²⁸ Evan Stevenson to R. J. Breckinridge, April 28, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Daily Atlas*, April 30, 1849, citing *The Kentucky Yeoman*. *The Kentucky Yeoman*, May 3, 1849.

²⁹ W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, March 17, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

³⁰ W. O. Smith to R. J. Breckinridge, April 7, 28, May 30, 1849; J. Y. Kemper to R. J. Breckinridge, April 28, 1849; W. J. Burgess to R. J. Breckinridge, May 2, 1849; William Hewlett and others to R. J. Breckinridge, May 8, 1849; Benjamin Mills to R. J. Breckinridge, May 11, 1849; James Matthews to R. J. Breckinridge, May 30, 1849; William Garrett to R. J. Breckinridge, May 22, June 12, 1849; W. R. Hervey to R. J. Breckinridge, May 15, 1849; D. P. Bedinger to R. J. Breckinridge, May 24, 1849; Frank Ballenger and others to R. J. Breckinridge, May 31, 1849; Evans Stevenson to R. J. Breckinridge, May 31, 1849; W. B. Moosier to R. J. Breckinridge, June 17, 1849; J. T. Boyle to R. J. Breckinridge, June 20, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

wrangler", Robert Breckinridge. Hardin carried his campaign against emancipation beyond Bardstown into the adjoining counties and denounced Breckinridge and the clergy with disrespectful bitterness. Hardin continued his violent attack on the "Black coats" as he called the clergy throughout the canvass. He abused both Dr. Young and Dr. Breckinridge without mercy for "Meddling" in politics.³¹

The Fayette County emancipation party had held a ratification meeting on May 12, for the measures adopted at Frankfort. Robert Breckinridge spoke for two hours and suggested that the meeting approve the Frankfort resolutions and nominate Henry Clay as a convention delegate. Clay rejected the invitation. The convention nominated Breckinridge as one of the state delegates. A week later he addressed the people of Fayette County at the Court House and accepted the nomination "in a speech which, for soul-stirring eloquence and deep convincing argument" had "seldom, if ever, been equalled" and never surpassed. Breckinridge had the address printed and it was widely circulated throughout the state at the request of local emancipation committees.³²

Breckinridge's address to the people of Lexington appeared in the *Lexington Observer and Reporter* of June 30 and July 4, 1849. Hambleton Tapp called this speech "perhaps the outstanding discourse on the subject of slavery during the year 1849". In the July 4th issue of the *Observer and Reporter* Breckinridge declared that slavery was ultimately doomed by the irrepensible law of progress:

There is in the bosom of all human societies a desire and a power of ceaseless progress. It has struggled always, it is struggling now, it will struggle to the end. Many failures have passed — many are

³¹ J. I. Speed to R. J. Breckinridge, May 12, 28, 1849; W. M. Allen to R. J. Breckinridge, June 8, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 24, 1849. *The Examiner*, July 28, 1849.

³² *Observer and Reporter*, May 16, 19, 23, 30, June 9, 1849. *Louisville Morning Courier*, May 18, 1849. *The Presbyterian Advocate*, August 8, 1849. *The Examiner*, June 2, 1849. Frank Ballenger to R. J. Breckinridge, July 2, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

still to come. Not until men clearly see the real and the only security for their great development, will those failures cease. . . . What is just, what is right, what is good — let them do these, and they will fail no more. What is wrong, what is unjust, what is evil — let them do these, under whatever pretext of political necessity, and they cannot but suffer and fail — renew the struggle, and suffer and fail again. It is this great lesson which an open Bible and free institutions are teaching the human race. It is not lost on us. Perhaps not today, but soon, Kentucky will take, must take another step in this great school of wisdom. The light that is covering the earth, cannot turn to darkness upon her pleasant hill sides and along her smiling plains. — The loud cry that goes up from the awakened earth, and the universal voice of nations shouting in hope, will not fall unheeded upon the ears of her generous people. When the day has come for mankind to break their chains and burst open their prisons, she will not select that day to consecrate her soil to eternal slavery, and dedicate her children to eternal wrong.

In May, Robert Breckinridge informed the Scott County emancipation party that circumstances beyond his control prevented him from accepting their invitation to speak in the county. After he accepted the nomination on the emancipation ticket in Fayette County, he began to make arrangements to carry on a campaign in that county. Added to the duties in his church and to the visiting of the victims of the cholera epidemic, the canvassing of Fayette County was all that Breckinridge felt he could give to the cause of the emancipation party. In June, he published a card in the press announcing that the requests to speak throughout the state were too numerous to answer personally. He announced to his friends that the people of Fayette County had seen fit to nominate him for the convention and that he considered it his duty to spend most of his time canvassing Fayette County. Although he would have preferred to have been left free to accept invitations throughout the state, under the circumstances he felt he must refuse all invitations outside the boundaries of his constituency.

As the election approached, Breckinridge revealed to his constituents that he greatly desired to see Kentucky made the exclusive abode of the free whites. "One of the leading motives of all my conduct with this subject, has been the hope of substituting the race of negro slaves with the race of free whites," he confessed. He continued to canvass Fayette County. On

June 11, he delivered an address on emancipation to the people of the county in Lexington, and near the end of the month, he wrote an expanded article in the *Observer and Reporter* in which he fully explained his views on emancipation and colonization. He condemned the repeal of the Law of 1833 and urged the people to close the door against the importation of slaves into the state, "not as a scheme of emancipation, but as a scheme of preservation; as an act of high political wisdom and justice; as a national testimony to humanity and civilization." He condemned the effort of the proslavery party to prevent the freemen from having a voice in determining the destiny of slavery in Kentucky. A well-known clergyman of the Disciples of Christ Church of Kentucky read the article and wrote Breckinridge that the providence of God had pointed him out as His apostle for the work in Kentucky. He urged Breckinridge to have the article printed as the best instrument to carry emancipation in Kentucky. He committed himself to bear ten dollars of the expense.³³

Since Breckinridge found it impossible to meet speaking engagements outside of Fayette County, he decided to have his *Observer and Reporter* article, "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution" printed in pamphlet form. "I propose to lay before my countrymen, briefly but clearly and in a permanent form my views on the subject of negro Slavery, as connected with the Constitution about to be formed for this Commonwealth," he wrote in his pamphlet. He explained that while many in the proslavery party alleged that God was the author of the institution of slavery, the great body of the disciples of Jesus Christ was on the side of humanity. "Why do you hear in popular addresses, such denunciations, and read in resolutions of popular assemblies, such denunciations of the ministers of the Gospel, whose abuse is a staple theme in a large portion of the proslavery party?" he queried. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he asserted, "are not only natural, but are inalienable rights of man. . . . They are sanctioned in the

³³ *Georgetown Herald*, cited in *Observer and Reporter*, May 19, June 27, 30, 1849. *The Presbyterian Advocate*, August 8, 1849. S. S. Pinkerton to R. J. Breckinridge, July 5, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

very heart of our national religion which teaches us nothing more plainly or with a higher emphasis, than that we who owe to the mere mercy of God our own lives, liberties and happiness, are utterly inexcusable in treating with indifference much more in sacrificing to our own selfish ends, the lives, the liberties, or happiness of others."³⁴ Bundles of the printed address were distributed to local emancipation committees as the date of the election approached.³⁵

The election of August, 1849, resulted in a disastrous defeat to the emancipationist party, Breckinridge among the victims. The defeated candidate immediately prepared a detailed article for the *Princeton Review*. What caused the defeat of the emancipationist party in Kentucky? Some said it was the luke-warmness of the churches in Kentucky. This charge, said Breckinridge, could not be brought against the Presbyterian Church. "The Presbyterians have taken the lead in this struggle. There is not a prominent man in the Synod of Kentucky who has not been conspicuous for his zeal and efforts in behalf of emancipation. . . . As far as we know, there is not a single Presbyterian minister whose name is found among the Advocates of slavery," Breckinridge affirmed. He maintained that the emancipationists had not been defeated by the slaveholders, as they were numerically very small. It was the votes of the non-slaveholders who defeated emancipation. The non-slaveholders had a great prejudice against the Negroes as a laboring class and as a race. A still more significant factor in Kentucky, according to Breckinridge, was the feeling of antagonism against the free states because of the abolitionist movement of the 1830's.³⁶

The place that Breckinridge was called on to occupy was partially filled by John C. Young. On May 3, at a ratification meeting in Louisville, Dr. Young was the principle speaker.

³⁴ Manuscript Pamphlet: "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution," by Robert J. Breckinridge, July 3, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 21, 1849.

³⁵ R. J. Breckinridge to J. G. Simrall, July 21, 1849; John Lillie to R. J. Breckinridge, July 24, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

³⁶ Robert J. Breckinridge, "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution of Kentucky," *Princeton Review* (October, 1849), 585, 586-588.

On May 11, he debated the question of constitutional emancipation with George Blackburn Kincaid [prominent Presbyterian lawyer of Lexington] before the Literary Club of Danville in the Danville Presbyterian Church. The debate extended over three days and was heard by an audience that included many from neighboring counties. The emancipation question had entirely absorbed public attention in Danville, and many felt slavery was involved in a life-death struggle. The emancipationists seemed highly pleased with the results while the pro-slavery advocates were not so well satisfied.³⁷

Young extended his speaking engagements outside of Boyle County and on June 16, he spoke in Harrodsburg. The address was answered by James Shannon, the pro-slavery President of Bacon College, the Disciples of Christ school in Harrodsburg. As the campaign began to draw to a close, Young extended his speaking engagements into Garrard County.³⁸

Joseph Rogers Underwood was the most important Presbyterian layman in the emancipation movement. In May, 1849, he addressed a meeting in Bowling Green. He spoke two hours and avowed that he would do his duty regardless of the threats that he would be recalled from the United States Senate. During the campaign he solemnly declared that slavery was "a great evil, wrong in its origin — injurious in its continuance to both races." Later in the year in answer to the claim that the discussion of slavery in 1849 was ill-timed, he replied that such a proposal was the propaganda of the opponents of the emancipation movement who wanted to suppress discussion now and forever.³⁹

There was only one Presbyterian journal in Kentucky, *The*

³⁷ *The Louisville Daily Journal*, May 4, 7, 1849. *Louisville Weekly Journal* May 26, 1849. *Louisville Morning Courier*, May 7, 1849. *The Frankfort Commonwealth*, May 8, 1849. *The Presbyterian Herald*, May 10, 1849. *The Maysville Eagle*, May 10, 22, 1849. John Stuart to Secretary, July 4, 1849, American Home Missionary Society Correspondence, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University; cited as AHMS Correspondence.

³⁸ *The Examiner*, June 16, July 7, 1849. Benjamin Coates to Dear Walter, June 20, 1849, Benjamin Coates Manuscripts, Filson Club Historical Club Library.

³⁹ *Presbyterian Herald*, July 5, 1849. *North American* (Philadelphia), cited by *The Louisville Morning Courier*, August 29, 1849.

Presbyterian Herald of Louisville, an Old School paper. The editor agreed with the *Princeton Review* which found slavery either right or wrong according to the circumstances. "Our opinion always has been," continued the editor, "that a system of very gradual emancipation, connected with a removal of the slaves . . . would be a great blessing to Kentucky." He was also equally well convinced that slavery was "an incubus upon the prosperity" of the state in all its interests.⁴⁰ The New School *New York Evangelist* saw the *Herald's* position as indicating the changes which were taking place in Kentucky. "Its condemnation of slavery has hitherto been of the feeblest sort; but encouraged by the change of popular opinion, it comes out with a boldness and point which even now is refreshing," asserted the editor of the *Evangelist*.⁴¹ A correspondent from Danville, Kentucky, to the conservative Presbyterian *New York Observer* predicted that "the fate of slavery was sealed in Kentucky." The clergy of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal denominations were found in opposition to slavery in the contest. The *Presbyterian Herald* had "contributed considerably to the dissemination of enlightened sentiments," he emphatically avowed.⁴² The Kentucky correspondent to *The Central Watchman*, a New School journal in Cincinnati, edited by a former Kentuckian, Thornton A. Mills, contended that the emancipation feeling was becoming stronger every day in Kentucky. The friends of the cause were more bold and decided in their commitment. "I am highly gratified to see that Presbyterians, both laity and clergy, and both Old School and New, are almost to a man in favor of emancipation. Indeed, I do not know of a single minister or elder, who takes the other side of the question," he added.⁴³

When Dr. Nathan Lewis Rice [formerly of Danville], editor of the Old School *Presbyterian of the West*, Cincinnati, learned that John L. Waller (Versailles), a Baptist minister,

⁴⁰ *The Presbyterian Herald*, March 1, 1849. *Watchman of the Prairie*, September 11, 1849.

⁴¹ *The New York Evangelist*, April 26, 1849.

⁴² Correspondent to Editor, March 19, 1849, Danville, Kentucky, *New York Observer*, April 14, 1849.

⁴³ "Philo" to Editor, April 23, 1849, *The Central Watchman*, April 27, 1849.

was running for a delegate's seat on the pro-slavery ticket, Rice expressed hope that public sentiment in his native state of Kentucky would give an overwhelming rebuke to any minister of the Gospel who would advocate perpetual slavery. Thornton Mills of *The Central Watchman*, Cincinnati, agreed with Rice. "We trust the discussion of the subject going on . . . in our native State will result in the adoption of some measures that will hasten its [slavery's] down-fall," Mills asserted.⁴⁴ When Rice was informed that statements in the *Presbyterian of the West* were being interpreted as supporting the pro-slavery cause in Kentucky, he denied the truth of the rumors. "Were I now in Kentucky . . . , I would esteem it no ordinary privilege to stand by those who are contending for the principles of enlightened philanthropy," he assured the emancipationists of Kentucky.⁴⁵

The Old School Presbyterians had been the great conservative body of that denomination in reference to slavery in the country. This was not true of the emancipation controversy in Kentucky in 1849. The New School Presbyterians in Kentucky, however, while much smaller in number, were uniformly in favor of emancipation. They worked in harmony with the American Home Missionary Society, the domestic missionary society of the New School Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Since many of the Presbyterian missionaries in Kentucky were from the North, they could do little because they were considered northerners and were naturally suspected of abolitionism. A case in point was that of John Stuart who felt he should limit his activities because he had only recently arrived in Kentucky. He observed that the emancipation sentiment in Kentucky was growing. "Yet thousands who are in the heart opposed to slavery are afraid to speak their minds openly on the subject because it has been hitherto so unpopular," Stuart informed the secretary of the American Home Missionary Society.⁴⁶ Eliphaz Perkins Pratt of the New School Presbyterian Church

⁴⁴ *Presbyterian of the West*, April 19, 1849. *The Central Watchman*, April 27, 1849.

⁴⁵ N. L. Rice to A Friend, June 17, 1849. *The Examiner*, June 30, 1849.

⁴⁶ John Stuart to Secretary, February 26, April 2, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

in Paris, Kentucky, was unwilling to be a passive observer. As chairman of the committee on missions of the Harmony Presbytery, he used his influence with the AHMS to secure the services of Matthew Marshall of Tennessee for missionary work as well as work in the canvass to secure emancipationist delegates to the convention. "He is a very *decided emancipationist*. He is a man of commanding talent and his influence . . . could not but have a favorable *effect on this question [slavery]*," Pratt assured the secretary.⁴⁷

In April, Benjamin Mills (son of famed Appellate Court Judge Benjamin Mills), a New School Presbyterian, Paris, informed Milton Badger, Secretary of the AHMS, that in common with the "whole Presbyterian body in Kentucky," he expected to be much engaged in discussing and promoting the great end they had in view.⁴⁸ A. C. Dickerson, pastor of the New School Presbyterian Church in Bowling Green, was probably the most energetic New School man in the emancipationist party. In April he took an active part in the state emancipation convention at Frankfort, after which he returned to Warren County to work in the canvass. Late in May he debated the county's leading pro-slavery man on the subject of emancipation. On June 11, he addressed the people of Warren County at the Court House and offered to debate any one who came forward during the remainder of the campaign.⁴⁹ As chairman of the committee of missions of the New School Synod of Kentucky he kept in close touch with Badger, Secretary of the AHMS. On July 1, 1849, he wrote the secretary that his mind and attention were absorbed in a new field of action into which duty seemed to call and in which he had been deeply engaged. This activity was the public discussion of the slavery question. Although his family was deeply involved in slaveholding, he informed Badger, "My church and family all are with me."⁵⁰

The New School Presbyterians were united in an agreement

⁴⁷ E. P. Pratt to Milton Badger, February 28, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Mills to Secretary, April 1, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

⁴⁹ *The Examiner*, June 2, 1849. *The Warren Intelligencer*, May 30, 1849, cited by *The Examiner*, June 9, 1849.

⁵⁰ A. C. Dickerson to Milton Badger, July 1, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

that the emancipationist cause should be continued if they met defeat in the August election. They planned a grand emancipation society which would work as a voluntary association to purchase slaves and send them out of the state. This plan, however, never materialized, but the New School Presbyterians were as strong in sentiment as the Old School. Their influence and prestige were not as great, however, because they did not have the powerful national leaders that the Old School Presbyterians possessed.⁵¹ Benjamin Mills could observe that every member of the New School Synod of Kentucky "by his vote at the polls, in his speeches on the stump, or his sermons in the pulpit had denounced the system of servitude as founded in injustice, and iniquitous in its fruits."⁵²

More than any other denomination in Kentucky the Presbyterians were opposed to slavery. In comparison with the Baptists and Methodists, the Presbyterian clergymen were few in number but their influence upon the public mind was much greater in proportion to their numbers than that of any other class of ministers. The Presbyterian congregations also were without a doubt the most influential body of Christians in the state. A Kentucky correspondent to the *New York Observer* was convinced that the emancipation movement in Kentucky was primarily a Presbyterian operation. "Remove the Presbyterian Church from the State," he wrote, "and the cause of emancipation . . . would be thrown back two generations." If the cause of emancipation ultimately succeeded in Kentucky it would be due, in a large part, to the Presbyterians. "The future hope of emancipation in Kentucky depends almost entirely upon the Presbyterian and Methodist bodies — chiefly the former, small as it is," he declared. The smaller association of Presbyterians in Kentucky, not connected with either the Old School or New School Presbyterian assemblies, were also emancipationists. In March, 1850, the Ohio Presbytery of the Cumberland Church, a Kentucky-based judicatory, met at Litchfield,

⁵¹ A. C. Dickerson to Milton Badger, July 1, October 5, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

⁵² Benjamin Mills to Charles Hall, October 5, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

took a straw vote on the new constitution and not a solitary man was in favor of it.⁵³

The Breckinridge brothers, however, were the giants in the movement. The editor of *The Louisville Morning Courier* had high praise for their work in the cause of emancipation. "We have watched the course of the Rev. William L. Breckinridge in the discussion of the cause of Emancipation with no ordinary degree of interest, and we have ever found him a manly, courteous, elevated and dignified gentleman," he wrote. This Breckinridge was an able, fearless, and correct champion of what he considered the eternal principles of right, of justice, and of philanthropy. The people owe "the two Breckinridges . . . a debt of gratitude" that could not be easily discharged. "We rejoice," asserted the editor, "that in the struggle between right and wrong, they were not cold, selfish, niggardly and cowardly calculators, but, that in the hour of conflict their voices were heard in favor of truth, and their right arms were bared for sustaining it."⁵⁴

Robert Breckinridge did not intend to give up the fight for emancipation. With the aid of Lexington friends, he considered establishing an emancipation newspaper in Lexington. Since the owners of the *Examiner* were considering closing their newspaper, a discussion with the owners took place with the idea of combining them, but the plan came to nought.⁵⁵ Breckinridge later found a use for his talents in the service of a journal established to contest the ratification of the constitution.

During the canvass at least one pro-slavery convention and several newspapers had suggested that the new constitution should contain a clause barring the clergy from holding office. When the convention met, a clause was proposed declaring that ministers of the Gospel should not be eligible for a seat in the Kentucky General Assembly. G. W. Bush and Stuart Robin-

⁵³ *The Kentucky Statesman* (Lexington), April 10, 1849. *New York Observer*, November 17, 1849; February 9, 1850. *Elizabethtown* (Kentucky) *Register*, cited by *The Louisville Morning Courier*, April 18, 1850.

⁵⁴ *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 10, 1849.

⁵⁵ I. A. Jacobs to R. J. Breckinridge, August 24, 1849; John H. Heywood to R. J. Breckinridge, September 18, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

son, Methodist and Presbyterian clergymen of Frankfort, sent a memorial to the convention protesting against the measure. John Waller, a Baptist clergyman in the Constitutional Convention, spoke against the provision. Waller, who was a pro-slavery delegate, recognized that the action was being taken against clergymen because in certain quarters it had been said that almost all ministers in Kentucky were emancipationists. This contention he denied. If emancipationists must be put down by the constitution, it would best be done by simply declaring emancipationists ineligible, Waller suggested. Despite all of Waller's eloquence the provision was incorporated in the constitution. It was the belief of Dr. Humphrey that the clause in the new constitution excluding ministers from holding civil office, was "undoubtedly aimed chiefly" at the Presbyterian clergy. Humphrey was of the opinion that the Presbyterian clergy did not covet civil office.

The prejudice against the clergy, however, went beyond the convention. When the General Assembly of Kentucky met in January, 1850, a proposal was introduced in the state senate to call on the clergy of Frankfort to open each session of the senate with prayer. An amendment was offered that no minister be invited who had attended the Emancipation Convention in Frankfort in 1849. The proviso would have eliminated all Presbyterian clergymen in the county, as well as many of those from most other denominations. A correspondent to *The Louisville Courier* protested against the amendment. "From my knowledge of the Presbyterian clergy," he wrote, "I feel authorized to say that nearly all of them would be cut off — the lips of many Methodist ministers would be sealed — Bishop Benjamin Bosworth Smith of the Episcopal Church would be excluded." Better judgement prevailed and the amendment was defeated.⁵⁶

After the defeat of the emancipation party in 1849, most clergymen were of the opinion that they should withdraw at least temporarily from the public contest and concentrate on

⁵⁶ *The Daily Commonwealth*, November 26, December 4, 5, 17, 1849. E. P. Humphrey to Editor, January 22, 1850. *New York Observer*, February 9, 1850. *The Kentucky Yeoman*, January 3, 1850. *The Louisville Morning Courier*, February 2, 1850.

efforts to purify their churches.⁵⁷ Robert Breckinridge was determined to continue the contest. Now that emancipation could not be written into the constitution, he concentrated on other objections to the constitution. Thomas Francis Marshall took the lead in opposing the new constitution. After several speeches in opposition to it, he established a journal in January, 1850, to be the official organ of the opponents of the new organic law. The new journal, *The Old Guard*, which was established as a weekly, disclaimed any intention of interfering with slavery. Marshall secured the services of Robert J. Breckinridge as a correspondent under the pseudonym of "A Citizen". In the first number Breckinridge criticized the time required before the constitution could be amended, and in later numbers he pointed out the contradictions written into the constitution and concentrated on his opposition to the court provisions and the school fund.⁵⁸

Following the eighth article, Breckinridge wrote his valedictory, but Marshall was able to persuade him to write additional articles under the name "Plebian". The basic purpose of the "Plebian" articles was to attempt to break the ranks of the Democratic party in its support of the new constitution. These articles revealed the tendency of the new constitution to concentrate absolute power in the hands of a select group that met the requirements of the constitution and won the favors of the people.⁵⁹

The contest to establish a constitutional procedure for abolishing slavery in Kentucky was not without its effects not only upon Presbyterians, but other religious associations as well, and in fact upon society at large. Freedom of discussion had been tested in Kentucky and had withstood the avalanche

⁵⁷ John G. Fee to Editor, *The Examiner*, December 1, 8, 1849. Benjamin Mills to Secretary, July 6, October 5, 1849, AHMS Correspondence.

⁵⁸ Thomas F. Marshall to Robert J. Breckinridge, March 28, 1850, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Old Guard* (Frankfort), February 6, 1850, I, No. 1, p. 11; February 21, 1850, I, No. 3, pp. 62-64. *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, February 6, 1850.

⁵⁹ Thomas Marshall to R. J. Breckinridge, March 28, April 9, 1850. Breckinridge Family Papers.

that attempted to overwhelm it.⁶⁰ The emancipation campaign had pointed out that slavery was an institution that was not compatible with Christianity. With the failure of a political remedy, many Christians turned to a more positive method of ameliorating slavery and the teaching of religion to the slaves.⁶¹ The work of the American Colonization Society was stimulated in Kentucky as many conscientious slaveholders turned to private action with the failure of public measures.⁶² For many Kentuckians the effort to abolish slavery in 1849 was a final campaign. During the next few years many Kentucky Christians left the state of their birth and settled on the free soil of the Northwest.⁶³ The Emancipation coalition of 1849 was the beginning of a new political faction in Kentucky. Although it would falter in its course, it would ultimately become the republican party of Kentucky.

⁶⁰ "Philo" to Editor, *The Central Watchman*, August 31, 1849.

⁶¹ L. Wesley Norton, "The Religious Press and the Compromise of 1850: A Study of the Relationship of Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian Press to the Slavery Controversy, 1846-1851," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1959, pp. 116-117, 122. *Presbyterian Advocate*, September 26, 1849.

⁶² *The Louisville Morning Courier*, March 23, 1850. *The Examiner*, November 3, 1849. J. R. Underwood to Elizabeth Cox Underwood, January 13, 1850. Joseph Underwood Papers, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University. Alexander M. Cowan to William McLain, December 17, 1849, January 23, 1850, American Colonization Society Papers.

⁶³ *Indianapolis Journal* cited by *Presbyterian Herald*, November 15, 1855. *Cincinnati Atlas* cited by *Daily Ohio State Journal*, June 23, 1849. Thomas M. Allen to John Allen Gano, December 26, 1850, John Allen Gano Family Papers, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri. *New York Baptist Register*, September 27, 1849.